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George receives feedback on HAL budget

KALAMAZOO – Following the success of last year’s local History, Arts and Libraries Senate Appropriations Subcommittee hearing, Sen. Tom George, R-Texas Township, once again brought the hearings to Kalamazoo.

George listened to testimony at Kalamazoo’s Epic Centre on Monday on topics ranging from Michigan Commission on Arts and Cultural Affairs grants to historic preservation.

“Last year was such a success with so many people and organizations bringing ideas and concerns to the table,” George said. “Several changes were made to the budget based on testimony we heard.”

Christine Berro, director of the Portage District Library, rose in support of continued state supplemental aid to state libraries.

“We serve everyone from the haves to the have nots and we like to think that we help to make that gap a little less wide,” Berro said.

Those testifying included Mayor Robert Jones of Kalamazoo, Craig Ruff from MCACA, Ken Nacci of Downtown Kalamazoo, Inc., Jennifer Reinstein from the Michigan Youth Arts Festival, George Orban from ArtServe Michigan, Karen Fulton from the Vicksburg Historical Society and Ann Rohrbaugh from the Kalamazoo Public Library.

Jeff Harkins, speaking on behalf of KRESA—Education for Arts, called into question the governor’s previous statements to work with the private sector to restore arts funding and called on the Legislature to act on that commitment.

George also took the opportunity to explain the repercussions of increases to Medicaid funding on the HAL budget. He further discussed ways, such as wellness initiatives, to positively cut Medicaid’s budget and therefore make more money available for other programs such as HAL.

“The HAL Department is not alone in experiencing cuts,” George said. “With one exception, all departments have experienced significant cuts to their budgets in the past few years. That exception is Medicaid, which has seen a 30 percent increase due to increased utilization.”

The legislation is currently being reviewed by the Senate Appropriations HAL Subcommittee.